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Commando Helped Blow Lid Off Alleged Plot to Kill a President

By Charles R. Babcock
Washington Post Staff Writer

On a steamy summer Florida weekend, two former members of an elite U.S. combat unit meet with a foreign general and a Miami arms dealer. The topic: a plot to assassinate the president of a Central American country.

The commandos later tell the CIA and FBI about the scheme and one agrees to work undercover to expose it. The investigation includes secret videotapes of the suspects aboard a yacht and taped discussions of a multimillion-dollar drug deal to finance the assassination.

If that sounds like an outline for a new episode of "Miami Vice," it isn't. It is a prosecutor's version of how the U.S. government stopped an alleged attempt last year to kill the president of Honduras.

Arrests in the case made front page news when announced last November, but the role of the two commandos in cracking the case wasn't disclosed until later. Their story will unfold in a Miami courtroom later this month when two of the defendants, arms dealer Gerard Latchinian and businessman Manuel Binker, stand trial.

The soldiers are retired Army colonel Charlie A. Beckwith, commander of the ill-fated attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980, and one of his Delta Force comrades, retired major Charles D. Odorizzi.

One of the prosecutors in the case said Beckwith was "more John Wayne than John Wayne" and Odorizzi "deserves a medal" for his undercover work. In fact, the U.S. attorney in Miami gave Odorizzi an "outstanding law enforcement officer" medal last month.

The investigation resulted in the U.S. indictment of several men, including former Honduran army chief of staff, Gen. Jose Bueso-

Rosa, now the military attache in Chile, on charges of attempting to finance a political murder with a drug deal.

The State Department has said the case "again demonstrates the link between drug trafficking and international terrorism."

Latchinian's attorney, Laurel White Marc-Charles, contends in court papers that her client thought he was dealing with U.S. authorities because of Beckwith and Odorizzi's background in secret military operations. Beckwith testified that the claim was ludicrous. Marc-Charles also claims that Odorizzi, in his undercover role, entrapped the defendants by suggesting the assassination could be financed by a drug deal.

Beckwith declined in a telephone interview to discuss his role in detail and Odorizzi could not be reached for comment. But the transcript and exhibits from a pre-trial hearing in April contain details of their involvement that seem more suited to a screenplay than reality.

Beckwith, who is now in the private security business in Texas, testified that he accompanied Odorizzi to the meeting in Miami in July 1984 because he was "trying to get my oar down in Latin America to do a few things" and thought the discussion would center on a training mission in Honduras. Instead, he heard from the people he met that "they wanted to take someone out."

Beckwith said he wasn't certain at first what was meant so he and Odorizzi called another meeting the next day. There they were told point-blank that the idea was to kill Roberto Suazo Cordova, the president of Honduras. Suazo has held office since 1981, when he became the first democratically elected

president in his country in more than a decade.

Beckwith testified that when he heard specifics of the alleged murder plot, "I said, 'That is a hell of a job to have to do.' I said, 'I'd have to chew on this.' And I said it would require a survey. Someone would have to go down there and look it all over. This is a big task to do. And frankly, I was a looking for a real nice soft way to get the hell out of there."

He and Odorizzi met once more with the alleged plotters and received \$3,000 for expenses, according to the indictment. "I don't work for nothing," Beckwith explained last week.

On the way back to Texas, he testified, "I remember that I said what I have got to do is, I can't mess around here and go to some pissant about this. I have got to go to someone high in the government and inform them." Beckwith said he didn't think assassinating the president of Honduras was "a prudent thing to do." And he said, "I didn't think this would be good for Reagan and this administration for that to occur."

The next day he called John McMahon, the deputy director of the CIA, whom Beckwith knew from his days with the Delta Force.

But McMahon was on vacation. A week later he tried again, only to be told McMahon couldn't see him until later in the week.

"I said, 'This is a hell of a way to run a railroad. I got something here I think is kind of sensitive, and I want to see him.'" The word came

back that McMahon was booked up at the time. Beckwith and Odorizzi flew to Washington anyway and on the plane the former Delta Force commander wrote a cryptic letter to the CIA's deputy director.

"Eight days ago in Miami, my partner and I were asked to devel-

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